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A SUBMISSION FROM THE CHILD WELFARE BRANCH, DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH AND SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT, TO THE FOSTER HOME COMMISSION

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Preamble

The Child Welfare Branch, as the administrative and policy making body established by the Covernment of the Province of Alberta to be responsible for the Child Welfare program in this province, is an integral part of the Department of Health and Social Development. As part of its overall responsibilities, the Child Welfare Branch formulates and implements policies for foster care. The Branch receives the legislative authority to do so under the Child Welfare Act and delivers the service through thirty-five geographically scattered regional offices.

The following are some areas of concern that the Branch would hope could be explored and examined in the course of the Foster Home Commission's deliberations. The content is not necessarily current policy but, rather, reflects thinking which might assist in developing a more effective foster care program in the province.

History

To help understand the present and more wisely approach the future, a look at the past is often useful.

The first legislation touching on foster care was the Children's Protection Act of 1909. Provisions were made in this Act to pay $3.00 per week, if necessary, for a child's care. By 1911, free foster homes were in extensive use and the problem, apparently, was not one of finding homes, but, rather, locating homes which did not simply see the child as a source of cheap labor. Doctors were used frequently as inspectors but, by and large, the only control on the quality of care was the condition that the foster parents write the Childrens Aid Society twice annually, outlining the progress of the child.

In 1915, some 675 children were in care, classified as in need of protection because "the mother was unable to support." Of this total 95 were placed out to work, 93 were in shelters or hospitals, 18 were in institutions, 195 were being adopted, 254 had been returned to relatives, and 20 died.

By 1945, 1613 children were in the care of the Superintendent of Child Welfare, Children's Aid Societies having dropped out of the scene by

this time. Of the 1613 children, 552 were placed in adoptive homes, 482 were in free foster homes, and some 700 were being maintained by Municipalities or the Province, most of them in "orphanage style" institutions.

Juvenile Offenders were transferred to the Attorney General's Department in 1951 and in 1957 the Department assumed the full maintenance costs of children in care. The rates for care in 1957 were $1.15 per day for children and $1.50 per day for teenagers. Up to 1958 there were only four Regional Offices, located in Drumheller, Calgary, Lethbridge and Vermilion, where social workers carried caseloads of up to 400 wards each.

By 1962 an additional 22 Regional Offices opened and caseloads dropped accordingly. Free homes,where the use of the child's services was a consideration, were discontinued. Cash allowances for clothing, medical and treatment services cards, and the granting of the Family Allowance to foster parents for wards in their home came into being. In 1962 there were 2854 children in paid foster homes and 746 in institutions. Shortly after this, some of the old style orphanages closed down placing even more wards in paid foster homes.

During the years 1964-67, foster home rates increased for wards of all ages, an increasing number of children required specialized services (the Diagnostic and Treatment Centre opened in 1967), Foster Home Associations started in Edmonton and Calgary, and a Foster Home Program Supervisor was added to the Departments Central Office to coordinate the ever growing foster home program. The number of children in institutions varied between 600 - 800.

Between 1968 and the present time, the foster home rates advanced to their present level, some 17 Foster Home Associations became operational, and the juvenile delinquent again became the responsibility of the Department.

At present, of the 8,000 wards in care, over 4,000 are in some 3100 paid foster homes and between 800 - 900 are in institution placements. Seeing to the needs of these 8,000 children are some 180 - 200 semi-specialized or specialized child care social workers, working out of 35 Regional Offices.

Public versus Private Foster Care Services

In Alberta all Child Welfare Services relating to child protection, juvenile offenders, adoption, and unmarried mothers, are administered through

provincial authorities. It has often been suggested that municipalities or private children's aid societies would be able to provide better services, and other provinces, notably Ontario, Quebec, and to a lesser extent, British Columbia, do indeed offer programs in this manner.

We believe that the Alberta administrative structure is superior to delegating child welfare services to a variety of agencies. Some of the apparent advantages are as follows:

(1) No municipal or agency boundaries affect the placement of children in foster homes. Resources and potential homes in every part of the province are available to every child in care;

(2) Since foster care policy is established on a provincial basis, the same standard of care is afforded a child whether his residence be in High Level or Calgary. Disparities in the quality of service due to geographic location are thus minimized;

(3) It would be most difficult to effectively separate foster care services from other provincial social development programs such as adoptions, child protection, and unmarried mothers, without disrupting or complicating foster care;

(4) It is efficient and economically sound to employ one administrative, direct service structure. Multi-agency involvement invaritably duplicates costs.

It is interesting to note that in Ontario, where fifty Children's Aid Societies exist, that a Government appointed Commission has recently recommended that the Provincial Welfare Department be designated the principal agency responsible for child welfare services.

Foster Care Legislation

The legislative authority to provide foster care and the right to use public funds for same is granted under the Child Welfare Act. This Act outlines under Section 5 (2)(d)(e)(f) the Director's responsibility in keeping careful and accuracte records of foster homes, in arranging for the evaluation, supervision and inspection of foster homes, and in causing case histories and records to be kept on children living in foster homes. Section 10 (a)and (c) goes on to indicate the authority under which the Legislature may appropriate public monies to maintain children in foster homes, and also for the training and education of foster parents.

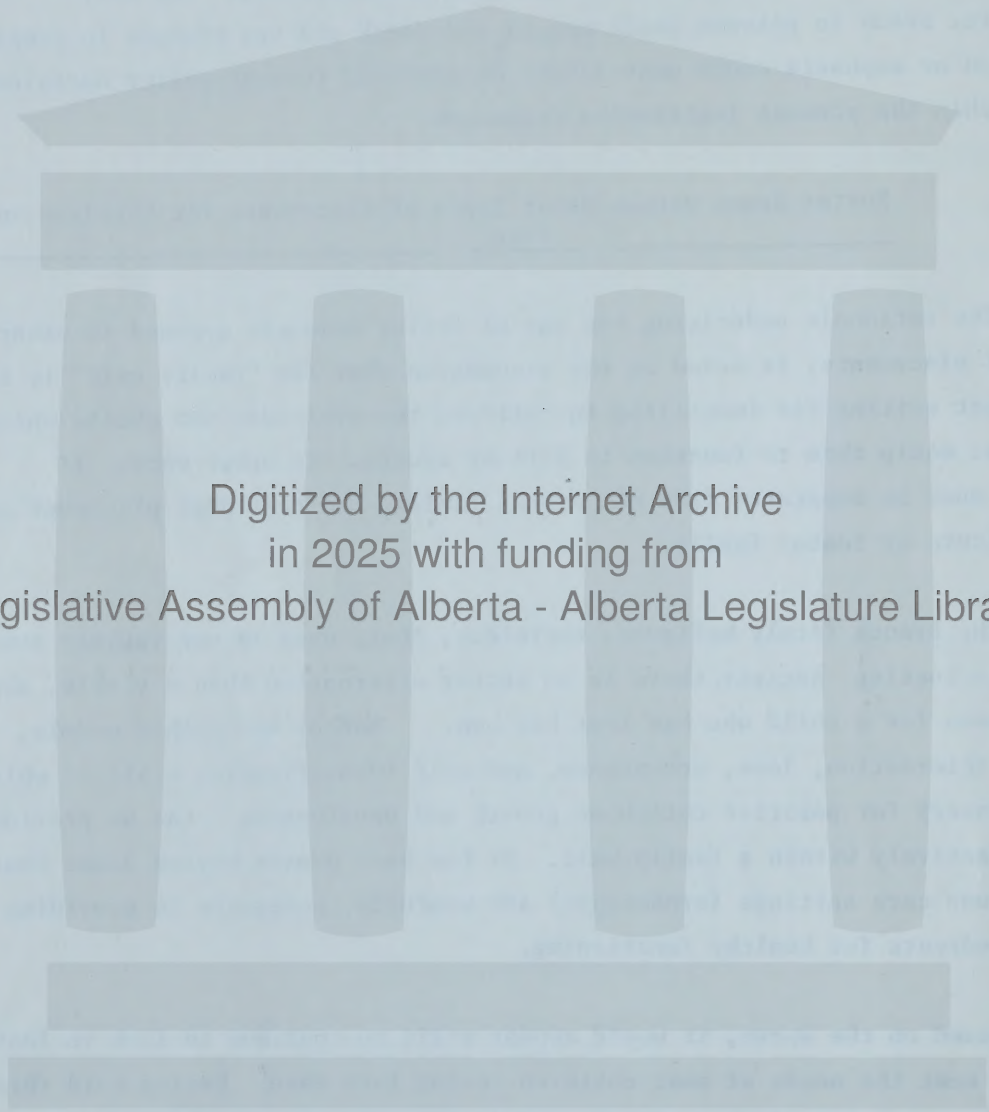
The Branch feels that the legislation, under the above-noted sections, is quite adequate in providing the scope necessary for the development of a high quality foster home program. In essence, the Act assures funds for all the foster childs physical needs, insists on proper recording and supervision of the child and the home, and provides for the training and education of foster parents (this can include Foster Home Associations). The Act, therefore, seems to possess ample breadth and depth and any changes in program direction or emphasis could most likely be achieved through policy decisions made within the present legislative framework.

Foster Homes versus Other Types of Placements for Children in Care

The rationale underlying the use of foster homes, as opposed to other types of placements, is based on the assumption that the "family unit" is the healthiest setting for instilling in children the attitudes and skills which will best equip them to function in life as adults. In other words, if a child must be separated from his normal family, the next best placement is a substitute or foster family.

The Branch firmly believes, therefore, that, even in our rapidly evolving, value fluctuating society, there is no better alternative than a viable, accepting foster home for a child who has lost his own. Mother and father models, sibling interaction, love, acceptance, and self identification - all of which are necessary for positive childhood growth and development - can be provided most effectively within a family unit. It has been proven beyond doubt that large group care settings (orphanages) are woefully inadequate in providing the ingredients for healthy functioning.

Based on the above, it would appear valid to continue to look to foster homes to meet the needs of most children coming into care. Having said this, it must be acknowledged that not all children can be placed in foster homes. Those who evidence severe mental deficiency or emotional disturbance often require formalized treatment or training found only in specialized institutions. Likewise, the juvenile offender may require more social control than is possible in a foster home, again calling for some type of special care setting.



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There are also children, especially middle or late teens, who find it difficult to relate to the intimacy of a foster home. Group homes, consisting of parents and six or seven other youngsters of a similar age, seem to meet the needs of this type of child well. Some fifteen group homes currently operate under the Department's auspices and have proven most effective.

In short, there is and will continue to be, a need for a variety of placements for children in care - from foster homes to formal institutions. It is clear, however, that foster care must continue to be looked on as the main placement resource. Some reasons for this are as follows:

(1) Child requires intimacy and model identification of a home situation. (The best of institutions are impersonal and artificial communities).

(2) Foster homes are scattered and community based, allowing the child to remain integrated with normalacy. (Institutions are centralized and, by necessity, group children expressing abnormal behavior).

(3) Foster children are not usually identified so readily as misfits and forced into meeting self-fulfulling prophecies. (Institutionalized children are isolated and labelled as deviants).

(4) Foster care is an inexpensive means of meeting children's needs, ranging from $2.00 - $10.00 per day. (Institutional care runs from $12.00 - $50.00 per day).

Future Need for Foster Homes

It is difficult to predict if the total number of children coming into care will increase or decrease during the next 10-20 years. Many social and economic factors will shape this movement one way or the other. If community based health and social services continue to develop, however, it may be that fewer and fewer children will come into care. Combined with increasing birth control measures and accessability to abortion, these preventive community services may well handle family-child problems which, today, result in wardship.

While future value, attitude, and program changes lessen the likelihood of wardship, the child that does come into care is more likely to

have needs which are difficult to meet. Currently, four of every five wards, who are not placed with view to adoption, are living in foster homes. If future wards exhibit more severe behavior problems, it is possible this ratio will alter and a greater percentage be placed in treatment facilities. The alternative to this will be better trained foster parents with a wider range of resources at their disposal. Social and financial reason dictate that the latter option is the route that should be emphasized.

In summary, there is a good possibility that, even if the volume does not increase, the wards coming into care will pose greater problems. Assuming that institutions are to be avoided if possible (reasons listed previously), a higher calibre of foster home will be required to meet the need.

What can be Done to Attract, Maintain and Develop Good Foster Homes?

(1) Foster Home Rates

Foster Home rates in Alberta have been traditionally calculated on the basis that the funds cover the costs of room and board plus minor personal incidentals, allowing for no profit on the part of the foster parent. It has been assumed that foster parents took the child in out of the goodness of their hearts and that the foster home rate simply covered the basic maintenance costs. The present rates are based on this rationale and, in relation to other Canadian Provinces, Alberta rates are equal or higher than most. If foster home rates continue to be based solely on maintenance costs, it seems only valid to increase them by 4-6% annually, perhaps tied in to the cost-of-living index as a frame of reference.

It can be argued with some validity, however, that foster parents should receive maintenance costs plus a partial salary for the care they provide children. Foster parents would thus be paid to look after children and this might motivate many homes which otherwise would or could not offer their services.

The Department already does provide special rates to some foster homes for the care of foster children who pose particular problems. In essence, therefore, a minority of foster parents are presently receiving a salary. The daily rate ranges from between $4.00 - $10.00 but this is a far cry from the exorbitant institutional costs.

It may well be that, regardless of some obvious pitfalls, the Department has to alter its philosophy of payment, and broaden its base by providing an income to most or all foster parents.

(2) Locating and Screening Foster Parents

If the quality of foster care must improve, the identification and screening of applicants will be doubly important.

In the Department's experience, it is often a misuse of time and money to advertize through the news media. The best homes seem to stem from self-referrals, or referrals through existing foster homes and the variety of community agencies that know what fostering is all about. It is also known that, if proper social work supervision is available to foster homes, that they are much more likely to develop into viable, positive units of care.

In relation to the screening of applicants, it is not felt that major policy changes are called for. Currently, a worker is asked to delve into the physical, social, economic, health, and religious aspects of a tentative foster home and also approach three outside references for comment. The Branch feels that, if this is done properly, a valid overall evaluation is possible. There would appear to be little justification for general psychological or psychiatric assessment of parents prior to approval.

(3) Social Workers and Supervision of Foster Homes

As mentioned previously, there is a high correlation between the quality of social work done with a foster home and the success of that home in meeting the needs of children.

The Branch believes in, and continually strives toward, attaining warm, mature social workers with the highest personal and academic qualifications. With these basic qualities, child care workers require close supervision and constant upgrading and personal development. Even though it is difficult to establish an optimum number of wards per worker, it is certain that reasonable caseloads are essential if the proper supervision of children in foster homes is to be accomplished. While many complex factors bear on this issue, ideally, it would appear that more staff training and lower caseloads would greatly benefit the calibre of child care offered.

How often a social worker should visit an active foster home is a point of debate. Branch policy dictates that contact is to be made with the foster home at least once monthly. The quality of the contact, however, is the key point that requires stressing. If the worker has completed a comprehensive homestudy, has established honest, open communication with the foster parents and the child, and has meaningful monthly contact on an ongoing basis, the supervision will likely be adequate for the majority of foster homes.

(4) Training of Foster Parents

Foster parents, to this point in time, have not had consistent access to formal or semi-formal training that might assist them to become better foster parents. While some may have taken individual evening courses, etc., the Department has not acknowledged its role or developed foser parent training programs to any degree.

What type of education and how it might best be delivered are somewhat uncertain, but if higher quality foster homes are called for, it seems inevitable that relevant training must be offered to foster parents very soon. Perhaps the Branch should recognize this as its responsibility and, subsequently, plan, budget for and implement a training program on a provincial scale.

(5) Foster Parent Associations

In Alberta, since 1966, some 17 local Foster Parent Associations have formed and, in 1970-71, a Provincial Body became established. Some of the

groups have come together on the Department's prompting while others developed quite separately. All, however, felt the need or saw the benefit of meeting on regular occasions.

The Branch supports the development of active, positive, Foster Parent Associations, both locally and on a Provincial scale. Such groupings can facilitate many of the ingredients mentioned earlier as being necessary for better foster homes. Some possible objectives or goals of local groups are:

1. To improve the lot of foster children within the area and to provide them with status and acceptance in the home and the community.
2. To provide a forum for the exchange of ideas and the handling of problems as foster parents.
3. To create an awareness of the role of the Department and its relationship to foster homes.
4. To provide for easier access by Department workers to a major group of foster parents.
5. To provide means whereby the foster parents can better place recommendations before the Department.
6. To develop better understanding by the community of the needs of foster children, the need for more homes and the need of the community to accept and work with the Foster Parent Association to the end that foster children will be accepted by all.

Some possible objectives or goals of a Provincial Body are:

1. To co-ordinate activities of the local associations.
2. To review suggestions and recommendations put forward by local associations and to collect facts and prepare briefs to submit to the Department.
3. To provide a channel of communication between Foster Parent Associations and the Department.
4. To provide guidance and leadership for local associations during the formative stage.

5. To provide general information to all member associations and particularly to be the vehicle for sharing program ideas for the local associations.

6. To provide a source of communication between individual foster parents and the Department in areas where no Foster Parent Association exists.

7. To promote public enlightment through public relations, education and involvement in the community in all matters pertaining to children and foster children in particular.

8. To act as an information centre and research body regarding finances, speakers, seminars and similar material for local associations. To disseminate such information to local associations.

9. To keep an up to date record of existing Foster Parent Associations in the Province of Alberta.

10. To organize, in co-operation with the Department of Health and Social Development an Annual Foster Parents Conference.

11. To be the collective voice of all foster parents throughout Alberta.

Granting the desirability of Associations, the Provincial Foster Parents Association has not become firmly established or clear in its objectives, and many local Associations have floundered because of inconsistent leadership and lack of clarity of purpose. The Branch feels that the Provincial Body should be encouraged to formalize its organization, set firm objectives, apply for budget monies from the Department, and take a much stronger role in assisting local groups to become viable units. This would appear to be the most likely way of developing healthy Associations across the Province that are able to work in cooperation with the Department in meeting the demands of the 1970's.

Foster Parent Adoptions

The foster parent's right to adopt a child in their care is often an emotional and contentious issue. Usually situations fall into two categories.

Firstly, foster parents often get attached to babies placed in their care pending adoption plans being completed. The Department's policy in these instances is not to let the foster parents apply to adopt until the child has been in their care forat least three months. Sometimes adoption arrangements take this long and this policy protects adoptive couples, who may have waited

many months, from having their baby being adopted by foster parents.

Secondly, foster parents often apply to adopt one of several wards who are living with them as foster children. The Department's policy is to not allow them to adopt one of several until alternate plans can be made for the other children. The main reason for this policy is the devastating effect it can have on the other children to see one selected out and be favored with the permanence of adoption while they remain wards.

The foregoing policy has been established to protect the rights of children, and, while individual cases will be reviewed to consider unique factors, foster home adoptions are handled within this frame of reference.

Conclusions and Recommendations

(1) The history of foster care in Alberta has seen an evolution away from large institutional placements and care.

(2) Concurrent to the foster care trend, especially from 1965-72, has been the establishment of specialized treatment facilities for children with extensive emotional or behavioral problems.

(3) Provision of child welfare services, including foster care, can best be made under provincial authority.

(4) Little change is required in the present Child Welfare legislation to affect a high quality foster care program in Alberta.

(5) Foster homes will continue to be the best substitute placement for most children who have lost their natural homes. Institutional care has too many inherent disadvantages.

(6) Notwithstanding (5), some children with special problems require a wide variety of treatment facilities because foster homes cannot meet their needs.

(7) For many teenage wards, and delinquents particularly group homes appear to be effective placements. A continued expansion of the group home program seems well justified.

(8) With the advent of improved community preventive services, future foster children may well be more difficult to handle than at present. This will call for a higher calibre of foster home.

(9) Current foster Home rates are issued solely for the maintenance of children and if they are to continue on this basis should increase annually as per the cost of living.

(10) It is possible, that to attain adequate foster homes in the future, salaries will need to be given to most foster parents. This is already being done to a limited degree with the provision of special foster home rates.

(11) Personal referrals appear to be the most reliable method of recruiting new foster homes. The news media have not proven to be effective.

(12) The screening of applicants and the positive development of foster homes can best be done by intuitive , warm social workers who have the time and the commitment to get to know their foster parents.

(13) Ongoing staff training of child care workers and low caseloads are to be sought after as the two key factors in assuring a sound foster home program.

(14) The formal or semi-formal training of foster parents may be necessary to ensure the high quality of foster home needed to meet future demands.

(15) The development of Foster Parent Associations is a very worthwhile movement and one which should be encouraged because of the many positive roles they can play.

(16) It appears as though a strong, Department supported, Provincial Foster Parent Association may be necessary to provide the leadership, broad perspective, and constant support required for viable local Associations.

The foregoing has touched on some of the contemporary issues, facing the maintenance of a good foster care program in Alberta during the 1970's. It is by no means comprehensive, but, hopefully, may add to the Commission's perspective as it grapples with this complex and fluctuating social problem. Underlying the whole foster care program is the necessity for the public at large to be concerned and knowledgable as to what the root issues are, and of accepting some responsibility in alleviating at least the effects, if not the causes.

The presentation is thus respectfully submitted with the anticipation that Branch members will have the opportunity to personally discuss these and many other relevant issues with the Commission.

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